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SOME PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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English composition itself is so much of a problem that a problem in the subject may seem somewhat of an anomaly. Be that as it may, I wish to describe some experiments that proved very successful last semester in my various English classes. In all, three problems were worked out: one in a Freshman class, one in a Junior class, and the third in a Sophomore class. All came at the end of the semester, where they served as an estimate of what the pupils could really do in composition.

The one in the beginning class was a problem in letter-writing. Throughout the semester the object was to make all composition work, and particularly letter-writing, as real as possible. Following this plan, I arranged to have my class of boys write letters to a class of young men of varying ages in the night school. These young men were foreigners from the various countries of Europe. Some, who had come to visit relatives, could not return because of the war, others had been here for a year or more, but most of them had traveled to this country to become citizens. Some were well educated in their own languages, and practically all had a trade or profession.

The night teacher made out a list of the pupils in her class, with a brief note in regard to their ages, occupations, and so on. I then read these notes to my class so that each boy might select his own correspondent. Some selected the correspondent because of the country from which he came; others, because of his trade. The man who had sung for four years in the opera at Manheim, Germany, and the one who could speak eight languages seemed very formidable to the boys, but finally two decided to write to them. Before the letters were written, the problem was discussed. The boys realized the necessity of writing very legibly, of being careful in spelling and in the punctuation of sentences, and, lastly, of

composing the letters in such a way that the night-school pupils would have something to answer. Both myself and the night teacher thought the pupils carried out the latter purpose very well. Questions were asked in regard to their native country, their occupation, and their trip across the ocean.

After the letters had been delivered by me the boys waited patiently for the answers, but when the first answer arrived they were as excited as they might have been over a Christmas gift. The letter was eagerly passed around the class for inspection. The next day the other answers came. The one exclamation was, "Why, they write better than we do!" Such was the fact, and the good penmanship of the night pupils proved more of a stimulus toward good writing than the exhortations of any teacher. In order that all might enjoy the letters, each boy read his aloud to the class. The questions asked by my pupils were answered very frankly, and the boys were delighted with the descriptions which they received of life in European countries. They smiled at the mistakes in English idioms, but also noticed some mistakes similar to their own in the uses of prepositions and connectives. The last day of the semester the boys wrote answers, which were much better than the first letters. So much enthusiasm had been aroused that the boys planned to continue the correspondence after the class had been scattered. Just today I received two letters from the night pupils to be passed on to the boys who are no longer in my classes. Altogether the problem was very successfully worked out.

The second problem was one in a Junior class, where exposition was being taught. The class was not particularly strong and I wished something to arouse enthusiasm. After several long themes had been written, a problem along vocational lines presented itself. Each pupil was asked to find out what person stands at the head of the trade or profession in which he or she wished to engage. Magazines and papers were consulted, inquiries were made of teachers who give instruction along those lines, and business men of the city were consulted. Next, each one was asked to find out what he could in regard to this person. The result of this investigation was then given orally before the class. A lively discussion followed in which the information was supplemented by the other

members of the class. However, several had not been able to obtain any information at all, for, as one pupil naïvely remarked, "They don't put a man into any of the books until he is dead." To remedy this deficiency, for which I had made allowances, I suggested that each one should write a letter to the person he was investigating, asking for facts about his life or for reference where those facts might be found. In writing the letters nearly all explained why they were seeking the information, and, in all cases, a stamped self-addressed envelope was inclosed for a reply. In some cases the pupils very wisely felt that the men concerned were too busy to be bothered with letters from boys and girls, so their letters were sent to newspapers and magazines. Before being sent the letters were submitted to me for approval and credit.

Answers were received quite promptly except in one or two instances, where the persons addressed were away from home. One boy, who received no reply even to his second letter, had just begun on another topic when his disappointment was turned to joy. The man, a professor at the University of Chicago, wrote a very courteous letter explaining his absence from home, and that no account of himself had been published. He was loath to give any facts about his life, but, as he did not wish to disappoint the boy, he did give a brief review of his life and work. The boy was much pleased by this consideration, and so expressed himself in his letter of thanks. Another boy so enlisted the sympathy of the man to whom he wrote that several letters have passed between them.

The final exercise was the written composition. In order to fit the material to the requirements of the course, each pupil explained how the person he had investigated had attained eminence in his profession. Each one endeavored to adapt his material to the topic and showed very good judgment in his selection of details. Several wrote lengthy papers. Between classes, early in the morning, and after school I was besieged by pupils asking my advice or approval about some point to be worked into the composition. It was easy to see that the pupils were enjoying the work. Finally, the compositions were read aloud before the class by the authors. Nearly half were excellently prepared, and none fell below the passing mark. Throughout the project the

pupils had done many things worth while. They had read many serious books and articles in magazines, had carried on a real correspondence with such persons as a professor in a large university, the editor of an agricultural magazine, a chautauqua lecturer, and the champion typist of the world, and had learned much about the vocations in which they wish to engage. From every point of view the project was a success.

The last problem, and, perhaps, the most difficult of the three, was the dramatization of *The House of the Seven Gables* by a Sophomore class. For several years, I had been waiting for a class that seemed capable of carrying out such a project. After the usual study of the story, during which I had the opportunity of testing the ability of the class, I told them of the plan. They were enthusiastic from the beginning.

The first task was the division of the narrative into acts. After each pupil had prepared a plan, the relative merits of each were discussed. On the second day, without any suggestion from me, some of the more ambitious pupils consulted books dealing with the structure of plays, that they might know what should properly be put into the various acts. After the general material for each act had been decided upon, the pupils turned their attention to the various scenes. This detailed work, with the relation of the different scenes to each other, required more time. A week was spent upon the general plan, the class hours being left for the discussion, in which practically every pupil took part each day. The only difficulties were the shortness of the hours and the eagerness of the pupils to express their opinions.

The general plan having been disposed of, the real composition of the play began. The class was divided into groups, to each of which the composition of a certain scene was assigned. Each one of the group wrote his version at home and the next day the group collaborated in preparing the scene. The groups occupied different parts of the room. As I sat at my desk, occupied with some mechanical work, or moved from group to group, I heard such discussions as these: "Shall we use an interrogative or declarative sentence here? Which would be the most effective?" "Is 'and' the right connective, or would 'but' be more correct?" "How

are we to bring in this detail?" "Hepzibah would not talk like that." Questions that never would have been thought of in an ordinary composition presented themselves, were discussed, and decided on by the pupils. Words were looked up in the dictionary, textbooks were consulted, and occasionally some group would ask my advice. Several times groups met after school to finish some scene, and, on one occasion, I actually had to send one group home. Though it was possible to use many of the conversations in the book, yet many had to be changed. In some cases almost an entire scene had to be written by the pupils. For instance, the early history of the Pyncheons and the traditions scattered throughout the book concerning "The House of the Seven Gables" had to be related by the characters in the first scene so that the audience would understand the situation. The class showed no little skill in suiting the conversation to the characters and to the time. Enough humor was introduced to keep the play from becoming monotonous.

As the play neared completion one group presented the question of a dedication. The class agreed that there should be one, but no one knew what was implied by a dedication. Consequently, books were consulted; dedications in Latin and in German as well as in English books furnished information on the subject. As a result, the class wished to dedicate the play to me. When I objected, they tried to convince me, and one girl calmly said she thought the class had a right to dedicate their play to whomsoever they wished. The rights of authorship were not to be ignored, but I asked them to consider my suggestion. Seemingly agreeing to my plan, they proceeded to write the dedication. On looking over the completed copy I found that, to their own satisfaction, they had combined my suggestion with their own plan.

A group that had done good work was asked to write the general preface stating the aim of the authors, while another group wrote the "Dramatis Personae," in which it was much interested. The title-page completed the work. The best penman of each group was delegated to copy the completed scene. Both individual and group papers were handed in for credit and carefully inspected to see that no point in any of the individual papers had been overlooked.

Then the entire play, scene by scene, was read to the entire class for their further criticism. After hearing one scene read, one group asked to be allowed to rewrite a scene in order to bring it up to the standard of the other. Two boys who had typewriters at home volunteered to make copies of the play. And so the play was finished.

At the beginning we had hoped to give a reading of the play before several other classes, but lack of time made this plan impracticable. However, that the pupils might test their work, they were allowed to invite another class of the same grade to hear a reading of the play. This reading was given without costumes or stage accessories after school hours the last day of the semester. The guests, who had heard of the project, really enjoyed the play. I do not wish to give the impression that the play was a perfect one or that a more advanced class could not have done better work. It fulfilled its purpose as a problem in composition, and was certainly a good production for a class in the first half of the Sophomore year.

In these problems the attempt was made to present real situations to the pupils and to give them a purpose for their compositions. The readiness with which they responded to suggestions, the excellent teamwork, and the results achieved have fully justified the experiments.